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ABSTRACT

The Learning House Tutorial Center in The Dalles (Oregon) was begun in 1975 as an alternative program for students who had dropped out of the regular educational programs in The Dalles School District and neighboring Chenowith School District. Now serving over 75 students in a downtown location, the center's year-round program includes a summer session for students short of the credits necessary for graduation or having difficulty making the transition from junior high to high school. An added tutorial component provides services to students still in regular programs. Individualized programs and learning contracts are developed for students referred to and accepted into the center. Support services offered by the center include child care for students' children and several kinds of counseling. Organized as an autonomous arm of The Dalles High School, the center has a close-knit, mutually supportive staff of five teachers, a secretary, the director, and a psychologist employed part time. The center has been well accepted by the community and is credited by the Wasco County Juvenile Department with having played a substantial role in the dramatic reduction of referrals to juvenile court between 1975 and 1980. (Author/PGD)

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Learning House Tutorial Center:

An Alternative Educational Program in The Dalles, Oregon

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by
Maggie Johnson

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OSSC BULLETIN

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Learning House Tutorial Center:

An Alternative Educational Program in The Dalles, Oregon

by

Maggie Johnson
Graduate Research Assistant OSSC

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Preface

During the past few years many studies have suggested possible reasons for the increasing student dropout rate. Often the structure and organization of secondary schools themselves have been cited as part of the problem for these alienated students. In traditional programs, organized by department and subject, these students are assigned to six different teachers each of whom is responsible for 150 or more other students. Under these circumstances, it is easy for such students to feel insignificant. In cases where students may have already fallen behind in a subject, this feeling can be disasterous, resulting in frequent absences and an eventual end to their school careers.

In this Bulletin, OSSC Graduate Research Assistant Maggie Johnson reviews a program that offers help at a crucial time in the lives of many students who would, by their own admission, have become dropout statistics if left in the regular high school setting. Emphasis on the individu[illegible] sets the program apart, at the same time realistic and immediate goal-setting and accountability help to underscore academic achievement.

The Learning House Tutorial Center in the Dalles has been lauded by school and community officials as well as students. This Bulletin, which describes the Learning House's history and program, should be required reading for board members, administrators, and teachers who are concerned with educating today's youth.

Philip K. Piele

Executive Secretary

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the people who generously offered their time and expertise so that this program could be shared with personnel in other Oregon school districts.

Lee Wagner, director of Learning House Tutorial Center, and Rich Correa, principal of The Dalles High School, provided extensive information and resources that formed the foundation for this Bulletin.

Learning House teachers Kathy Gonser, Madeline Mesplay, Don Layton, and Lucile Torgerson were very helpful.

Diane Stults, secretary at the Learning House, made the author feel welcome as did the students in attendance.

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Introduction

Oregon State law requires school districts to counsel students who intend to drop out of school about the availability of alternative programs. It reads:

> Upon receipt of written notice of intent to withdraw from the regular school program by a pupil 16 years of age or over for reasons other than enrolling in another educational program, a district school board shall propose to the pupil and document to the parent, legal guardian or person in parental relationship alternative programs of instruction and counseling or regular program instruction combined with counseling for the pupil. (ORS 339.250 [6])

As one means of complying with this law, many school districts have begun offering alternative programs within the district for students who have dropped out of school. Approximately nineteen Oregon school districts have such district-supported alternative school programs. Among them is the Dalles School District #12, which developed its program in compliance with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and in cooperation with the Chenowith School District #9.

Located in the Dalles, the Learning House Tutorial Center has been well accepted in the community and is considered by the Wasco County Juvenile Department to be linked to the steadily decreasing rate of juvenile delinquency in the county.

This *Bulletin* describes the history and philosophy of the Learning House Tutorial Center, the program it offers, and the selection of staff members. The final section provides information related to the success of the Learning House as measured by its acceptance in the community and its reported relationship to the declining delinquency rates in the area.

History and Philosophy

In May 1975 funds became available through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to begin an alternative school program in the Dalles. Lee Wagner was assigned the task of organizing the program. Lee had taught in the high school for several years and had always had an interest in working with students whose needs were not met by traditional programs. As he told the writer in an interview, he had a reputation for being "innovative, but trustworthy"--traits necessary to begin a project of this type.

Wagner had some strong convictions about what an alternative school program should be. He visited some existing programs around the state to determine if his visions were workable. He wanted a program that would be completely individualized and that could meet more than just the academic needs of the students it served. The first step, of course, was to find an appropriate facility.

The Search for a Building and Students

The building would have to meet the same building, fire, and sanitary codes as any other school facility. Two rooms above a downtown business were located. The space had not been used for seven or eight years, so it needed a lot of work. It did have the required two bathrooms and a sprinkler system, however, so it was relatively easy to renovate.

The Learning House is still located in the same building, but it has expanded to occupy three large rooms in addition to the two original smaller rooms (now used as offices). One room is used for storage but also

has a lounge and an individual study area. The other two rooms are set up with large tables for students to use when working on assignments.

When the Learning House began in the summer of 1975, the staff consisted of two teachers and one aide. The teachers were Wagner and Lucile Torgerson. Both are still at the Learning House, though Wagner now serves in an administrative role.

After arranging for facilities and staff to begin the Learning House, Wagner needed to find students. He contacted high school dropouts from the previous years in The Dalles. The response rate was fairly high; forty-two students began school in the new program that first year. Since that time, enrollment has grown to nearly ninety students, of whom approximately seventy-five are active participants in the program.

The Learning House's location has proved to be a positive factor for the program. It is four blocks from The Dalles High School and about one mile from the junior high. It is approximately three miles from Wahtonka High School in the Chenowith School District. Because the Chenowith School District contributes one teacher's salary to the program and is involved cooperatively with The Dalles School District, bus service is provided for Wahtonka area students attending the Learning House.

From the beginning Learning House was intended to be a year-round program. It started as a summer program, to continue in the fall, because it was necessary to get it going and the money was available. The summer program has continued each year as a supplement to the school-year program. It provides a needed service for two special populations of students--those

having trouble making the transition from junior high to high school and those seniors who are a few credits short of graduation with their classes.

Many students find the transition from ninth grade at the junior high to tenth grade at the high school very difficult. Often they think that dropping out of school is the only answer. The summer program provides help in making that transition for those having difficulty--academic or otherwise. This year about forty students have been identified as being already so deficient in credits that they will enter high school unable to graduate with their classmates in the normal school program. The Learning House summer program has been very effective in keeping such students on track.

The summer program has also provided the necessary opportunity for those seniors who suddenly find themselves short the credits needed to graduate. They can earn the credits and thereby avoid another full year of school. Without the availability of the summer program, most students would rather drop out than face another year of school knowing they should have already graduated.

The Learning House Philosophy

The Learning House was established to be a completely individualized program that could meet more than just the academic needs of the students. Because many students have previously experienced problems in socializing and relating to their peers in addition to problems in performing academic tasks, the Learning House staff designed a program to meet the needs of the "whole" student in a responsible, warm way. The staff explains the center's

philosophy in A Parent and Student Manual. The manual, presented to both the student and the parent upon entry into the program, explains:

> Each student deserves an educational environment which provides a sense of security, a feeling of acceptance, and the opportunity for success.
>
> Each student deserves the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process of planning their educational program.
>
> Each student should be allowed to make mistakes, and be encouraged to learn from those experiences.
>
> Each staff member is available to the student as a many-faceted resource person as well as tutor and friend.
>
> We further believe that if the above conditions are met, the student will experience academic progress as well as growth as a responsible human being.

Addition of Tutorial Component

The Learning House program was initially intended to serve only dropouts; that is the student had to be out of school to be eligible. After the first year, the program expanded to include a tutorial component so students would not actually have to leave school to avail themselves of the services offered by the Learning House.

With the addition of the tutorial component, there has been a noticeable change in the population of students served. Rather than serving mostly students who are out of school (as in the beginning), the Learning House is now serving more students who are still in school. The January 1981 enrollment figures show that approximately two thirds of the students were still attending school and taking advantage of the tutorial component, whereas only one third were dropouts enrolled in the Learning House as alternative students.

Even these percentages understate the program's effect on the dropout rate. Currently, many of the students are referred to the program by social services agencies, the state's Children's Services Division, or juvenile court. The Learning House also has successfully integrated many of these "immigrant" students into the regular junior high or high school programs.

The Learning House Program

In this chapter we examine the procedures by which students are referred to and enrolled in the Learning House, the contract that defines each student's responsibilities, the instructional program, and the variety of student support services.

Referral and Enrollment

Students who have reached at least seventh grade but have not yet graduated from high school are eligible for the Learning House program. The basic criterion for enrollment is that for some reason the students have not been able to effectively function in or benefit from the traditional school program. Approximately two thirds of those attending the Learning House are also enrolled in the regular school program.

Currently, the majority of referrals for students to attend the Learning House come from the regular school systems. (Students who are not attending another school, however, may be referred by their parents, social services agencies, or themselves.) A specific process is used for referring students from the regular school program to the Learning House. This process was developed to ensure that the program would not be abused or seen as an easy way out for students not wanting to attend school. First, approval must be obtained from the student's parents. Then the school counselor must recommend the Learning House as the appropriate environment for the student, and the school administrators must be involved at least to the extent they are aware and supportive of the move. The final step is to obtain approval from a Learning House representeative. The end result of the process

is that when a student enrolls in the Learning House from a public school system, everyone involved has agreed that the move is appropriate for the student to make at the time.

Once a student is enrolled in the Learning House, an individualized program is developed. This program is not as formal or involved as the Public Law 94-142 Individualized Education Plan required for handicapped students, but it is based on an assessment of the student's needs, both academic and nonacademic needs. Some basic achievement testing is conducted to determine the student's instructional level. Many of these students have become deeply frustrated from working in the regular school at a level beyond their abilities.

Each student's curriculum is determined through the referral process by the professional judgments of those involved. All basic skill areas are included for most students, including skills necessary in getting and holding jobs.

Enrollment at the Learning House is voluntary for the students. However, by making the commitment to enroll, students are accepting the responsibility to attend. Lee Wagner explains, "It's not difficult to help students understand that it's their choice. After ten days of consecutive absence, they must be dropped from the rolls. They may reenroll, however. It may take a series of enrollments before the responsibility finally catches some students, but that's okay. To some we're known as the school of a thousand chances."

A few students are not ready to handle the responsibility required when they enroll. So that these students won't end up on the street, the

Learning House staff members do all they can to assist the students in finding jobs. The staff members work closely with CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) personnel and other employment agencies, make referrals for jobs, and assist the students in applying for jobs.

The Contract

After the student has completed the enrollment process, been initially evaluated, and made the commitment to attend regularly, the student and a staff member together write a contract for his or her assignments. The contract is renewed weekly when a staff member and the student review the progress made during the week. They then decide on goals and materials for the next week. The contract, therefore, provides a weekly statement of goals, a schedule of activities, and a method for reporting progress for each student.

Use of the contract thus places the ownership of the program with the students, who must take an active part in their education. They decide with the staff how much work they think they can accomplish during a week, using materials selected according to their interests, abilities, goals, and learning styles.

By signing the contract, a student agrees to act responsibly according to the program's basic behavioral rule: "Act at all times in a manner which represents the best in me and which does not infringe on the rights of others or endanger the reputation of Learning House." The student's

signature also commits him or her to attend for the time specified and to make a helpful contribution to the school. The contract also defines the student's goals and assignments. Finally, each student agrees to write at least twenty-five words per day in a journal; the journal entries are read by a staff member of the student's choice.

Student progress is evaluated at the end of the contract week by the student and a staff member. Behavior, attendance, work, journal, and contribution goals are each evaluated as "met," "exceeded," or "not met." The new contract for the following period is then negotiated. The contract is written on NCR (no carbon required) paper. The student receives one copy, and the other copy is filed in the student's contract folder. (A copy of the Learning House Weekly Contract is included in the Appendix.)

The Instructional Program

Because all instruction is individualized, no formal classes are held. Students work on their own material and at their own paces according to what is specified on their contracts. The teachers are continuously circulating in the study rooms to assist students as needed. At times, the teachers may schedule specific instructional times for some students.

Students can earn credit from the schools they normally attend for work completed at the Learning House. Some students are tutored in class work from their regular school while at the Learning House. The student's regular school teacher may provide the materials to be used, or supplementary materials from the Learning House may be used to teach the student the skills required to pass the class. The students are graded and given credit by the regular classroom teacher.

Another way students can receive credit for work accomplished at the Learning House is by having their work assessed by the Learning House's director and the regular school's counselor. At the end of each grading period, the Learning House staff prepares a listing of each student's accomplishments. This listing, The Instructional Program Summary, includes the student's attendance, work completed, test scores, and other information relevant to evaluating the student's progress. The information from each weekly contract evaluation is used as part of this report. The director of the Learning House then meets with the counselor from the student's regular school to determine the amount of credit the student has earned. The credit awarded is then entered on the student's transcript, but no grade is given.

Rather than working for credit toward a diploma from a regular school program, some students choose to improve their basic skills as preparation for taking the Test of General Education Development (also known as the Graduate Equivalency Diploma or the GED). The test is not administered by the Learning House, but preparation for it is an option students have while attending the Learning House.

Student Support Services

Various support services are also available to students attending the Learning House. Some services are available directly through the Learning House, whereas others are available through a liaison between the Learning House and various community agencies.

A part-time counselor is employed by the Learning House. She is

available for individual consultation, individual and group counseling, biofeedback and relaxation training, and vocational guidance counseling. She is not generally involved in long term therapy, but refers students needing it to the local mental health center.

The Learning House has established a liaison network with several social services agencies to facilitate and coordinate referrals. The agencies involved in this network include the Wasco Sherman Public Health Department, the Mid-Columbia Center for Living (mental health), the state Children's Services Division and Vocational Rehabilitation Division, and the Wasco County Juvenile Department.

Another support service available to students is the Infant Care for Students program. This service is funded by United Way and the 4C Council to provide child care for students with infant children. The program is located in the same building as the Learning House, and it provides many students with infants an opportunity to participate in the Learning House program and continue their education. Students in the regular school program may also avail themselves of this service, which was established to help anyone in school who has a child under the age of two and one-half years. A parenting class has been available in the past as part of the Infant Care Program, and it may be instituted again when time permits.

The Learning House Staff

For the school district's administrative purposes, the Learning House is part of The Dalles High School and is under the supervision of the high school principal, Rich Correa. Because it is in a separate facility with a different organizational plan, the Learning House also requires an onsite administration. Lee Wagner, therefore, has been designated as the director.

In addition to the director, five teachers and a secretary are employed at the Learning House. One teacher is also a half-time counselor. A psychologist is also employed part-time as a consultant.

Staff Selection

Lee Wagner has been very careful in selecting the staff for the Learning House. He has chosen people who are "student- and people-oriented." They are people who can establish a level of trust with the students, including a friend-to-friend relationship. The staff members must provide positive adult role models for the students, who watch staff members closely and observe their interactions. The Learning House provides an opportunity for students to begin experimenting with new ways of relating to adults and to their peers. Many students are hostile initially, but through positive interactions with staff members they are able to learn new ways of relating to others.

Staff members have been carefully selected for their abilities to work with adolescents. Wagner describes them as "the teachers whose classrooms

are always full of students after school. They can't pass through the halls without a crowd surrounding them. They are the teachers who advocate for the kids without advocates. Every district has teachers like this and should utilize them to meet the needs of the 'turned-off' students." All of the staff members at the Learning House have been teachers with good reputations within the district.

The central theme of the faculty at the Learning House is that people make the difference. Wagner points out that "all of us who have made it through an educational system can recall times of a very critical nature. We've all considered dropping out at one time or another or getting into some self-destructive routine. Probably all of us who made it through those crises can think back to the teacher, counselor, coach or some other significant adult person who was there to help us through that time and keep us on the right track." The important connection Wagner mentions has not happened in the traditional school setting for many students. These are the students who need what the staff at the Learning House can offer.

At the Learning House many of the students can establish the critical relationship with a caring adult that will provide the support they need to continue in school. This is due to both the type of people employed and the relaxed atmosphere that encourages closeness between students and teachers.

Support for Teachers

The type of program offered by the Learning House is very demanding of teachers and could easily lead to the "burn-out" syndrome experienced in other settings. Additionally, the type of teachers employed are those

who give extensively and are prone to the "burn-out" syndrome. The program and students can be very trying and frustrating to keep up with day after day. Therefore, it is critical for this kind of program to provide a system to keep the staff together and emotionally strong. Several components are involved in the support system established for the Learning House staff. The major areas of support emphasized are working with the students, working with each other, and individual support.

The staff members work closely together to help each other. They meet for thirty minutes each morning and for forty-five minutes four afternoons per week to discuss the students. Any problems with students and programs are discussed so that, with input from the entire staff, solutions can be developed.

One day each week, a two-hour staff meeting is held for staff members to work with each other. Leadership of this group meeting alternates between the psychologist employed as a consultant to the program and the counselor. No discussions of students, programs, administrative tasks, or housekeeping tasks are allowed during the two-hour period. Instead, the meeting is given to discussion of the ways in which staff members support each other and meet each other's needs. Additionally, any areas of friction that may exist are dealt with at this time.

Provision has also been made for each staff member to consult individually with the psychologist for a regularly scheduled hour each week. This consultation time gives staff members the opportunity to work through any personal problems on a one-to-one basis. The subject matter may vary from session to session. Staff members may need to discuss personal

problems, or they may want to discuss their feelings pertaining to program operation and so forth.

Varieties of Teaching Styles

Each staff member individually is committed to positiveness and optimism that transfers to the program and moves it in a positive direction. Each person brings his or her own strengths to the program. The staff members who come from differing backgrounds, ages, and styles, provide different attractions to meet the needs of the diverse population of students they serve. The common ground they all share is reflected in the way the program operates. Each staff member is willing to do almost anything to help a student.

It has worked out that students and staff members at the Learning House "choose" each other. Some very special connections have been made. The environment at the Learning House provides the atmosphere necessary for "those magic moments that every teacher understands" to happen, according to Wagner. He continues, "It's very exciting. Nobody ever complains of boredom here." The connections mentioned are made in a number of different ways. Each part of the contract (for example, academic areas, support areas, journal areas) provides an opportunity for a student to select a different teacher to work with him or her. Often a closeness results that can change the student's life for the better.

Success of the Learning House

Two measures of the Learning House's success are its acceptance by the community and its effect on the delinquency rate. Evidence on each of these measures points impressively to the program's value.

Community Acceptance

The Learning House program has been well accepted by the school community. Rich Correa, principal of The Dalles High School, told the writer in an interview that the program has been beneficial both to the students it serves and, indirectly, to all the students in the regular high school:

> Because every school has a portion of the student body that is really turned off with the academic scene and is not able to function in the traditional structured setting of a regular school, it takes something like the Learning House for them to survive academically. They get served in a much better fashion at the Learning House, and the students that are left at the regular high school don't have their education interfered with. The atmosphere and attitude of The Dalles High School is one of the best I've been associated with, and I attribute a lot of that to the fact the Learning House exists.

Another aspect of the Learning House program that is impressive to those in the school community is the responsibility placed on the students. The students are expected to act in a manner that will reflect positively on the program. In the six years the program has been operating, no incidences of vandalism have occurred--not even in the form of simple graffiti. Both Wagner and Correa agree that the students attending the Learning House are those most people would expect to write on walls and

vandalize schools. Wagner explains in party why they don't: "The kids come to understand very quickly that the Learning House is their place, and if it's going to continue to be there, they have to act as responsible citizens."

The support the Learning House has received is not only verbal. The support has been expressed monetarily in that the program was one of the few in the district not affected by budget cuts initiated last spring. In preparation for the unavoidable cuts, a meeting was held by school board members, budget committee members, and district administrators. They compiled a list of all activities considered to be above and beyond the scope of the basic first-through-twelfth-grade program. This list included sports, clubs, and also the Learning House. The people at the meeting then marked those programs and activities they would consider cutting. Of the more than sixty programs listed, the Learning House was one of only five that was not marked at all. Wagner states, "The Learning House is doing the job of meeting the needs of the students it serves. It is apparent that neither the schools nor the community wish to forego the service."

Although there are still people in the community who believe education can only take place in a rigid, traditional setting. Wagner explains that the Learning House has proved itself not to be a loose program that allows students to do completely as they please. "If we were, in reality, the 'alternative' school where kids just came and sat around and smoked and goofed off, then we wouldn't survive. We wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be tolerated, much less supported. The kids understand that. They understand the importance of being good citizens."

Delinquency Prevention

In 1975, the Wasco County Juvenile Department reported 988 referrals to juvenile court for crime, status, and traffic offenses. This was the peak year after steadily increasing numbers of referrals. In 1976, the number of referrals droped to 751, and it has continued downward to 432 referrals in 1980--lower than at any time in the past eighteen years. This steady decrease in juvenile offense referrals has been attributed in part to the program offered by the Learning House.

James Roth, director of the Wasco County Juvenile Department several times has referred to the contribution made by the Learning House in decreasing juvenile offenses. In a letter of support for juvenile programs written to State Superintendnet of Schools Verne Duncan, Roth stressed:

> There is a very high correlation between the children on our Juvenile Court Caseloads and the children receiving services at the Learning House here in The Dalles. Having worked in The Dalles as a Juvenile Probation Counselor for a number of years, I am well experienced with the problems we were having in this community before Learning House became a reality and since Learning House has started operation. After having juvenile delinquency referrals peak in 1975, our rates have been declining fairly steadily ever since. I attribute a part of that to the work which Learning House is doing with their students.

In the introduction to the 1980 Annual Report of the Wasco County Juvenile Department, Roth mentions alternative education programs as one important factor contributing to the reduction of delinquency in recent years. Although there are additional reasons for the reduction in Wasco County's juvenile offense referrals, it should be noted that several of the factors that separate the Learning House program from traditional school programs may be the same factors that keep the students

involved there from committing juvenile offenses. Students agree not to act in any ways that would reflect negatively on the Learning House and jeopardize its operation. This responsibility accepted by the students as members of the community and as representatives of Learning House could also serve to keep them law abiding.

Conclusion

The Learning House is a valuable asset to the community and the school systems in The Dalles. Additionally, and most importantly, it makes a contribution to the students attending. Rich Correa summarizes the value of the Learning House for the students it serves: "The most important aspect of the program is not the students who get high school diplomas or GEDs, although those are very important. The most imporatant aspect is that adolescents who would be unskilled and uneducated are learning the skills required to get and keep a job. Those students will not be unemployed."

Appendix: Learning House Weekly Contract

Name _____ Contract Number _____

Component I _____ Alternative
II _____ Tutorial

Contract Date _____
Evaluation Date (P) _____
Evaluation Date (A) _____

Home School _____

Form 297

LEARNING HOUSE WEEKLY CONTRACT

While enrolled at Learning House, I agree to:

I. Act at all times in a manner which represents the best in me and which does not infringe on the rights of others or endanger the reputation of Learning House.

II. Attend Learning House from _____ (Arrive) to _____ (Leave).
on Mon., Tues., Wed., Thurs., Fri. for a total of ___ hours.

English	C & I
Math	Math
Reading	Lit.
S.S.	S.S.
Sci.	Sci.
	I.B.S.

III. Study and work toward mastery of skills by doing the following.

SKILLS	WORK

Tutorial Classes _____

Supplementary Subjects _____

IV. Experience communication through writing 25 words per day in my Learning House Journal. My chosen staff member is _____

V. Make a contribution to our school by helping out in some way.

Contribution _____

Signed _____ (Staff)

Signed _____ (Student)

	Behavior	Attendance	Work	Journal	Contribution
Exceeded					
Met					
Needs Improvement					

"Exceeded" means going beyond, or doing more than meeting Basic Agreement
"Met" means meeting agreement - doing what was contracted
"Needs Improvement" means agreement was not met in this area. More effort needs to be made.

EVALUATION ACCEPTED _____

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